

FACTA UNIVERSITATIS

Series: **Linguistics and Literature** Vol. 12, N° 1, 2014, pp. 25 - 41

## MARGINALIZING COMMITMENT: SYNTACTIC EUPHEMISMS IN POLITICAL SPEECHES

UDC 81'42:32

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**Abstract.** *In discourse, speakers/writers can use various linguistic devices to marginalize their or somebody else's commitment to the expressed proposition in order to be exonerated from the responsibility that a more directly, explicitly expressed agency and/or commitment to the proposition would imply. The paper focuses on syntactic euphemisms, broadly taken as whole sentences formulated with few or no negative connotations, or, more particularly, as syntactic structures that can be employed to avoid the burden of responsibility for decisions and actions that can turn out to be wrong and damaging. The paper illustrates the discourse strategy of marginalizing commitment by means of syntactic euphemisms using examples from American and Serbian presidential candidates' speeches. The analysis includes both the linguistic aspects and the critical discourse analysis point of view, trying to expose this discourse practice as a way of hiding or at least playing down potentially unpleasant or harmful facts and truths.*

**Key words:** *syntactic euphemisms, marginalizing commitment, discursive strategies, CDA*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Politicians are orators, they give speeches to make the audience accept what they want to be accepted in order to achieve desired political goals. They speak about topics that are inextricably related to a nation's well-being, such as ways and means, war and peace, national defence, imports and exports, and legislation, as Aristotle (2000: 50) conveniently summarized it in his treatise on rhetoric. However, very often, the art of persuasion becomes the art of prevarication, employed by politicians to marginalize their commitment to the expressed proposition. One of the ways to do this is to use syntactic euphemisms. Generally speaking, euphemisms are "mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used in place of coarse, painful, or offensive ones (Rawson: 1981: 1)". In terms of their function in

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Submitted February 28<sup>th</sup> 2014, accepted for publication in May 2014

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discourse, they can be classified into “veiling” (“verhüllend”) and “concealing” (“verschleiend”) euphemisms (Luchtenberg 1985: 24, cited in Burkhardt 2010: 356). Veiling euphemisms replace religious and social taboo expressions, and concealing euphemisms are conveniently used, as Burkhardt (2010: 357) explains, as a means of “deliberate hiding”. In terms of structure, Burkhardt (2010: 358) classifies euphemisms into two groups: syntactic euphemisms, in which the whole sentence is in a way infected, and lexical euphemisms, where the less intense meaning is carried by one word or a phrase.

Burkhardt (2010: 358) defines syntactic euphemisms as “sentences formulated by means of words or phrases with no or relatively few negative connotations, in a way which warrants that unpleasant truths are hidden or at least played down”. Another definition of syntactic euphemisms comes from Penelope (1981: 475), who explains that syntactic structures can be used to “project an ‘impersonal’ point of view [...] They reveal, however, not ‘objectivity’ on the part of the speaker, but the creation of ‘syntactic euphemisms’, utterances in which it is the speaker’s intent to downplay the grosser, more realistic aspects of some event for the ‘benefit’ of the hearer, thereby providing less information than either the speaker or the hearer may possess at the time, or presenting whatever information there is in such a way as to protect the speaker’s belief system”.

These definitions underline the manipulative power of syntactic euphemisms, and more broadly speaking, the manipulative power of language in general. Therefore, the use of syntactic euphemisms for the purpose of marginalizing commitment in politicians’ speeches lends itself to being analyzed within the domain of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard 1996, Chilton 2004, Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2003, Mišić Ilić & Blagojević 2007, Mišić Ilić 2011, Van Dijk 1996, Van Leeuwen 1996, Weiss & Wodak 2003, Wodak & Chilton 2005, Wodak & Meyer 2001). CDA studies, resists and exposes the correlation between language manipulation and power relations by giving insight into how the struggle for power is reflected (or actually disguised) in language. So it seems only natural that marginalizing commitment for the purpose of maintaining a politician’s credibility can be best exposed within the theoretical framework of CDA.

After presenting the theoretical framework of CDA, the paper proceeds to explore the phenomenon of marginalizing commitment by means of syntactic euphemisms. To do this, we have analyzed the speeches of four presidential candidates, two American and two Serbian, in order to identify linguistic devices and discursive strategies employed for the purpose of marginalizing commitment.<sup>1</sup>

The analysis of the political speeches comprises the description, classification and quantification of linguistic syntactic and discursive aspects, and the obtained data are interpreted in accordance with the following aims:

1. to draw conclusions about the extent to which politicians marginalize commitment by means of syntactic euphemisms;
2. to compare and contrast the use of syntactic euphemisms in American and Serbian speeches;
3. to determine the general tendencies in the use of syntactic euphemisms and discursive strategies and whether they can be related to politicians’ accountability or the lack thereof.

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<sup>1</sup> The links to speeches are given in the reference section.

As this is a small-scale study, the results cannot lead to conclusions about marginalizing commitment by means of syntactic euphemisms in political speeches in general. However, this research can serve as an illustration of how politicians can strategically deny responsibility. In that way, the consequences of political decisions are attributed to social actors other than themselves or are not attributed to anyone at all, thus making responsibility irrelevant.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Critical discourse analysis

Norman Fairclough (1989) introduced critical discourse analysis as an approach to language study that stresses the importance of “language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power (Fairclough 1989: 1)”. This means that CDA studies language function, as opposed to linguistic theories that study only formal aspects of language. CDA relies on critical linguistics (CL) put forward by Roger Fowler and Gunther Kress (1979), which points out that “something could have been represented some other way, with a very different significance (Fowler 1996: 4)”. This approach echoes Foucault’s (1972: 27–28) consideration of the theme that all manifest discourse is based on what is already said, and that the manifest discourse “is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say”. Therefore, it takes a critical stance to demystify, analyze and deconstruct representations that are discursively constructed and characterized by ideological relativity (Kress 1996: 15–31).

Critical discourse analysis begins with *description*, one of the levels of analysis taken from CL, an approach in language study based on Halliday’s (1978) systemic functional grammar (SFG). SFG examines how people use language and how language is structured for use as a semiotic system (Eggins 2004: 20–21). Halliday (2003:180–212) explains that language is a system of networks, so the term *systemic* is fundamental to the study of grammar in language. The term *functional* refers to explaining the forms of the language by referring to the functions they express. As a system, language offers different possibilities or probabilities of expressing meaning, suitable for specific social goals. Therefore, a critical analysis begins with a description of a written or spoken text, in other words, the analysis of the grammatical resources employed in a particular text (linguistic description). Texts can be interpreted in various ways, and meanings are created during the process of interpretation, so the second level of analysis in CDA is *interpretation*, in which the text is studied in relation to the productive discursive process and the interpretive discursive process. Finally, the third level, *explanation*, focuses on the relationship between the discursive processes and the social context, taking into account social conditioning and the social effects of production and interpretation (Fairclough 1989: 21–22).

As already stated, language can be used to produce, maintain and change social relations of power, but it can also be used to disguise relations of power, which can be done on such a regular basis that the practice can become invisible, and, thus, normalized and naturalized. For example, Fairclough (1989: 41–46) discusses the concept of *hidden power* in relation to media discourse. In media discourse, there is no direct, face-to-face communication with the audience, and, as a result, there is no feedback from the audience,

which characterizes face-to-face communication. In such an environment, mass media can decide how to represent events, to impose interpretations of events, which in itself is an exercise of *hidden power*.

This paper analyzes another way of exercising *hidden power*, and that is *hidden power* in relation to marginalizing commitment in presidential candidates' speeches. In this type of communication, speakers (politicians) assume that people in the audience are their supporters, but there is no real direct communication between the politician and the audience; the politician talks and the audience listens. Also, politicians' speeches are to be heard not only by their followers, but also by voters in general when their speeches appear on the internet or in the newspaper, so there is always a large number of people politicians do not communicate with directly. Politicians, therefore, try to create positive images of themselves, and one way to do this is to avoid or marginalize commitment to declarations that should be binding, and, in that way, they try to instill confidence and trustworthiness.

## 2.2. Political speeches

We have analyzed four presidential candidates' speeches made during the presidential election campaigns in Serbia in May, 2012, and in the United States of America in November, 2012. The Serbian corpus includes one speech by Boris Tadić (1971 words), a Democrat, the president of Serbia from 2004 to 2012, and the other made by his opponent, Tomislav Nikolić (2132 words), the Serbian Progressive Party nominee. The English corpus includes one speech by Barack Obama (1527 words), a Democrat, running for his second term, and the other made by his opponent, Mitt Romney (1856 words), the Republican Party candidate.

Both Serbian and American elections happened in the period following the global financial crisis that began in 2007, an economic recession whose effects have been devastating for both Serbia and the USA, with consequences such as rising unemployment figures, growth of homelessness, bankruptcy, debt and an uncertain future. Against the backdrop of the global economic crisis, the focus of both 2012 elections was deliberating on the solutions to the challenges of the devastating recession, such as the increasing number of people living on or below the poverty line, the general lower living standard, and an ever increasing gap between the poor and the rich.

Tadić made his speech at a convention in Kragujevac on March 18, 2012, approximately two months before the presidential election. As Tadić was the president of Serbia for a long time, from 2004 to 2008, and was then re-elected and served as president from 2008 to 2012, it was no surprise that the economic downturn in Serbia which characterized that period was very much attributed to his bad leadership. His speech starts with emphasizing the good things that happened during his presidency; he celebrates the success of opening of a new car factory in Kragujevac, which made Serbia a better investment environment and created more jobs for the unemployed. Although he admits that there were difficulties during his presidency, he insists on the success of the Democratic Party (he was also president of the Democratic Party from 2004 to 2012) regarding mending broken relationships with the European Union. Tadić stands up for the orientation towards the European Union, and though he admits that there were difficulties during his presidency, he states that the Democratic Party members did not change their opinion or ideology, unlike other politicians.

Nikolić, Tadić's opponent, lost to Tadić in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections. He had been a member of the Serbian Radical Party, a nationalist rightist party before he became one of the co-founders of the pro-European Serbian Progressive Party in 2008. In the 2012 election, despite his ideological transformation, Nikolić was in a much better position than Tadić, who had been the president of Serbia long enough (from 2004 to 2012) to be blamed for the debilitating recession in Serbia. In his speech made on May 2, 2012 in Niš, Nikolić heavily criticizes the politics and politicians that pushed Serbia to severe poverty.

Obama became president in the 2008 presidential election, after he defeated John McCain, the Republican Party candidate. Obama's campaign was centered on the failures of the politics of the Republican Party, its president George W. Bush, and the global financial crisis. One of the most important issues of the 2012 election was to continue with the efforts to reduce unemployment. The speech Obama made on August 3, 2012 deals with overcoming this problem by creating more jobs, reducing taxes and strengthening the middle class. He criticizes the Republican Party for their involvement in giving more tax cuts to millionaires and billionaires.

Romney made his speech on August 14, 2012 in Chillicothe, Ohio, and he also focuses on the standard of living. As Obama had already served his first term, Romney focuses on the things that were not improved during Obama's presidency. He criticizes Obama for not keeping his promises, and for pushing apart the Republicans and the Democrats.

### 2.3. Discursive strategies

In order to explore and expose the practice of marginalizing commitment, syntactic euphemisms are analyzed in conjunction with discursive strategies. As van Leeuwen (1996: 34) explains, different types of formal, verbal, or linguistic realizations (in this paper, syntactic devices) are different ways of representing the social world. These representations are linguistically grounded, but what CDA insists on is the functionality of language, rather than form. In that sense, CDA changes focus from linguistic devices to discursive strategies, from a purely formal aspect to the functional aspect of language. For example, it focuses on the category "nomination", rather than the linguistic category "nominalization", or "passive agent deletion" (van Leeuwen 1996: 34).

Syntactic euphemisms whose function is marginalizing commitment can be brought into relation with three general discursive strategies suggested by Reisigl & Wodak (2001: 45), and Wodak (2001a: 73):

1. There are referential/nomination strategies, whose aim is to construct and represent social actors. There is no single verbal realization for this strategy. For example, Reisigl and Wodak (2001:45) explain that this is done in "a number of ways, such as membership categorization devices, including reference by tropes, biological, naturalising and depersonalising metaphors and metonymies, as well as by synecdoches in the form of a part standing for the whole (*pars pro toto*) or a whole standing for the part (*totum pro parte*)". Also, van Leeuwen (1996: 32–70)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Aside from aggregation, impersonalization and exclusion, van Leeuwen (1996: 46–48) speaks about genericisation and specification, but these two strategies are not included in the analysis. Specification is excluded because it is a strategy where social actors are represented as specific. In other words, this strategy refers to the explicit, direct mentioning of the social actor, which is the opposite of euphemization. Genericisation is a strategy where social

discusses several subtypes of referential strategies (examples are taken from the analyzed speeches):

- a) Aggregation is used to represent people collectively. For example, this strategy can be realized by means of active constructions with the overt subject in the first person plural, but without a very clear reference, for the purpose of stressing the collective spirit (e.g. Romney: *We will not leave you behind*);
- b) Impersonalization is used to represent actors as something other than human. For example, the linguistic category of nominalization is used to avoid mentioning specific agents (e.g. Obama: *Rebuilding a strong economy begins with rebuilding our middle class*);
- c) Exclusion refers to excluding social actors from discourse. For example, modalized impersonal constructions are used to avoid mentioning the doer of the action (e.g. Romney: *It doesn't have to be this way*).

There are two subtypes to the strategy of exclusion, and these are suppression and backgrounding. The former refers to excluding a social actor. For example, in Serbian, active constructions with the null subject in the third person singular are used to avoid mentioning the doer of the action (e.g. Nikolić: *Nećete, kaže, valjda Srbiju u te ruke da date* / You won't, **(he??)** says, allow Serbia to fall into their hands.) This strategy is stronger in specifying the doer of the action than in case of passive agent deletion. The latter is a strategy which backgrounds a social actor. According to van Leeuwen (1996: 39), this type of exclusion is less radical in the sense that the social actor may not be mentioned in relation to a particular activity, but is mentioned somewhere else in the text, so the actor is de-emphasized, rather than excluded. This type of exclusion is not analyzed in this paper as the purpose of syntactic euphemisms is to hide the truth or give less information, whereas in backgrounding, it is possible to infer the missing information from the larger context.

2. Perspectivation, framing or discourse representation refers to the way speakers position their point of view. For example, the use of the coordinator *but* can introduce a contrast that justifies the delay (e.g. Tadić: *Verujem da nije daleko dan kada ćemo otvoriti još jednu fabriku automobila u našoj zemlji, ali da bi se to desilo, postoji predistorija* / I believe that the day will soon come to open another car factory, **but** to make that happen, there are preconditions).
3. Mitigation refers to modifying the epistemic status of a proposition. It answers Wodak's (2001a: 73) questions: "Are the respective utterances articulated overtly? Are they intensified or are they mitigated?". For example, in addition to being used to realize the strategy of perspectivation, *but* contrast can also be used for mitigation as it limits the scope of the proposition, and in that sense reduces the responsibility of the speaker.

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actors are represented as classes, rather than individuals. This strategy is realized through pluralized nouns, or nouns with a definite or indefinite article. As pluralized nouns are not a purely syntactic, but a morphosyntactic category, they are not discussed in this paper.

2.4. Syntactic Euphemisms: A Classification

Various language devices can be employed as syntactic euphemisms to marginalize commitment in political speeches. For example, Burkhardt (2010: 358–360) mentions impersonal constructions, vague references and the use of the passive voice instead of the active voice. Penelope (1981: 478–483) speaks about topicalization (for the purpose of emphasis), the absence of overt agency, the deletion of agents in passive constructions, the non-restrictive relative clause (as if it was simply additional information), nominalization (no explicit reference) and *but* contrast. Mišić Ilić (2011: 96–103) discusses several syntactic mechanisms that can be used to hide the agent, such as passivization, impersonal constructions, ergative constructions and nominalization.

The classification of syntactic euphemisms analyzed in this research is based on the three mentioned classifications.<sup>3</sup> The following table lists the types and subtypes of syntactic euphemisms analyzed in the paper:

Table 1 Types of syntactic euphemisms

Types of syntactic euphemisms
1. Impersonal constructions
2. Nominalization
3. Agentless passive
4. Vague reference
5. <i>But</i> contrast
6. Restrictive clauses
7. Conditionals

3. ANALYSIS OF SPEECHES

3.1. Syntactic euphemisms in the speeches

This section of the paper gives the number of occurrences and examples of syntactic euphemisms found in four presidential speeches, abbreviated as T for Tadić, N for Nikolić, R for Romney and O for Obama:

<sup>3</sup> The classification of syntactic euphemisms analyzed in this paper is based on the three mentioned classifications, but it has been adapted in the sense that it excludes three types of syntactic mechanisms. Penelope’s topicalization is excluded because topicalization is a syntactic mechanism referring to moving a constituent to the beginning of the clause, and not referring to a specific structural unit. It also excludes non-restrictive clauses because these clauses give additional information about the noun that has already been identified. Usually, these are proper nouns, so it can be said that non-restrictive clauses serve the purpose of over-informing the addressee, not hiding the information, which is what euphemization does. The third excluded type, ergative construction, has not been found in the speeches (not for the purpose of marginalizing commitment). On the other hand, in this paper, two more types of syntactic euphemization are introduced, and these are restrictive clauses and conditionals. Restrictive clauses can be used for the purpose of euphemization because their function of modification is in the hands of the speaker, who, by using restrictive clauses, can choose how to construct and represent the actor. Also, conditionals can be used as syntactic euphemisms, because, by limiting the scope of the proposition, they can be related to the strategy of mitigation.

## 1. IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS: T (12), N (8), R (4), O (0)

### 1.1. Modalized impersonal constructions: T(11), N(4), R(3)

In Serbian (null subject language): *potrebno je/treba, trebalo je, moći, mora*  
(it is necessary, it couldn't be, it is possible, should, should have, must)

(T): **Potrebno je menjati stvari.** / (It is necessary to change things.)

(N): [...] *da vam pokažem da je ta ideja odavno trebalo da bude ostvarena.*

([...] to show you that the idea **should have been put into practice** a long time ago.)

In English: It + be (affirmative or negative) + [modality]

*It doesn't have to be..., It wasn't supposed to be...; It is time to...*

(R): *It doesn't have to be this way! It wasn't supposed to be this way.*

### 1.2. Existential sentences (exclusion of agent): used for representing events as happenings on their own: T (1), N(2)

In Serbian: *bilo je/ biće, (there were, it will be)*

(T): *Bilo je teškoća, bilo je trenutaka kada ostajete sami, bilo je trenutaka kada sebi postavljate pitanje...*

(There were difficulties, there were moments when you were on your own, there were moments when you would ask yourself [...])

### 1.3. Infinitive (non-finite form) or da + present (similar to infinitive): N(2)

(N): *Prvo njima opet obezbediti posao* / (First to provide jobs for them again)

*Od čega će da se živi u gradu?* / (What will people live on in the city?)

### 1.4. Factive construction: used to present the proposition of a that-clause as general truth: R (1)

English: It is clear/obvious/evident ...+ that-clause...

(R): *It is clear that President Obama's policies aren't fixing these problems.*

## 2. NOMINALIZATION: T (2), N (1), R (3), O (4)

(T): *Nastavak ulaganja u poljoprivredu, infrastrukturu, ne samo u puteve, nego i telekomunikacije i energetiku*

(Further investments in agriculture, infrastructure, not only roads, but telecommunications and energetics as well)

(R): *We started out on the decks of a battleship in Norfolk, Virginia, where arbitrary and reckless defense cuts threaten our national security and 150,000 jobs*

(O): *Rebuilding a strong economy begins with rebuilding our middle class*

*An independent, non-partisan study found that one plan at least would give more tax cuts to millionaires and billionaires*



### 3. AGENTLESS PASSIVE: T (2), N (1), R (0), O (2)

(T): *Postavlja se pitanje* zašto nije moglo svih prethodnih godina?

(The question is why it couldn't be done over all the past years.)

(N): [...] *da je ta ideja odavno trebalo da bude ostvarena*

(the idea **should have been put into practice** a long time ago)

(O): [...] *not only to reclaim all the jobs that were lost during the recession, [...]*

That issue **is probably not going to be resolved** until after November.

### 4. VAGUE REFERENCE: T (40), N (23), R (32), O (25)

#### 4.1. Active constructions

##### 4.1.1. Active constructions with null subject (3p sg.or pl.): N(13), T(1)

(N): *Nećete, kaže, valjda Srbiju u te ruke da date.* / (You won't, **(he??) says**, allow Serbia to fall into their hands.

(T): *Ustali smo i onda kada su pucali u nas.* / (We rose up even when **they took a shot at** us.)

##### 4.1.2. Active constructions with null subject (1p pl.): N(9), T(28)

(T): *Obećali smo da će se to dogoditi.* / (**We promised** it would happen.)

##### 4.1.3. Active constructions with overt subject (1 p.pl) but not a very clear reference: N(1), T(3), R(29), O (22)

(T): *Mi menjamo prostor u kojem živimo.* / (**We change** the environment we live in.)

(N): *Nadgledaćemo mi [...]* / (**We will be supervising**[...])

(R): *We will not leave you behind.*

**We will put** Americans back to work!

##### 4.1.4. Pronoun YOU: O (2)

O: *That is not how you grow an economy.*

#### 4.2. Phrases (usually NPs with unclear reference)

##### 4.2.1. NPs: T(1), R(3)

T: *Produžili smo rok zbog toga što nas je napala ova pošast krize [...]*

(We extended the deadline because this **crisis plague** had attacked us [...])

##### 4.2.2. Phrases (other than NPs) instead of single words: T(5)

T: [...] *najvažnije je da oni koji su doživeli pad ipak na kraju ustanu*

( [...] it is the most important thing for those who **experience a fall** to eventually rise up)

##### 4.2.3. NPs with indefinite quantifiers: T(2), O(1)

(T): *Dragan Đilas je bio predvodnik u tom poslu, i mnogi drugi gradonačelnici* / (Dragan Đilas was the leader in that job, and, also, **many other mayors**)

*Učinili smo mnogo prethodnih godina, posebno pojedine lokalne samouprave* / (We have done a lot in the last several years, especially **some local governments**)

O: And this week, we learned that *there's some in the Republican Party who don't want to stop there.* (indefinite quantifier pronoun combined with existential *there is*)

### 5. BUT CONTRAST: T (3), N (0), R (0), O (0)

T: *Produžili smo rok zbog toga što nas je napala ova pošast krize, **ali** smo izvršili naše obećanje.*

(We extended the deadline because this crisis plague had attacked us, **but** we kept our promise).

### 6. RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES: T(10), N (6), R (0), O (2)

(T): *Da li snagu tog izbora nose ljudi **koji su menjali svoje reči koje su se suprotstavljale jedna drugoj** [...] ?*

(Is the strength of that choice in the people **whose words changed and contradicted one another** [...] ?)

(N): *Neću da vam pominjem one **koji su nas osramotili, ponizili, ojadili, osiromašili***

(I won't mention the ones **who disgraced us, humiliated us, made us poor and miserable**)

(O): [...] *there's some in the Republican Party **who don't want to stop there***

[...] *if the notion is that we give tax breaks to folks **who don't need them***[...]

### 7. CONDITIONALS: T(2), N (1), R (2), O (3)

(T): *Za ta prava, za bolji život [...] **možemo se izboriti ako svakoga dana menjamo Srbiju.***

(For those rights, for a better life [...] we can fight **if we change Serbia every day**)

(N): ***Ako nas želi** neće nam postavljati uslov koji nećemo moći da ispunimo*

(**If they want us**, they will not impose conditions we won't be able to satisfy)

(R): ***If we focus on these five areas – energy, education, trade, deficits, and championing small business – America's economy will come roaring back to life***

(O): ***If we want to keep moving this country forward**, these are the folks who are going to get us there.*

***If we were persistent, if we kept at it and kept working**, that we'd gradually get to where we need be.*

Table 2 below shows how frequently a particular language device is used as a syntactic euphemism:

**Table 2** Comparative analysis: language devices

Language devices	Tadić 1971 words	Nikolić 2132 words	Romney 1856 words	Obama 1527 words
1.Impersonal constructions	12	8	4	0
2.Nominalization	2	1	3	4
3.Agentless passive	2	1	0	2
4.Vague reference	40	23	32	25
5. <i>But</i> contrast	3	0	0	0
6.Restrictive relative clauses	10	6	0	2
7.Conditionals	2	1	2	3
Total	<b>71</b> <b>3.6%</b>	<b>40</b> <b>1.9%</b>	<b>41</b> <b>2.21%</b>	<b>36</b> <b>2.36%</b>

Generally speaking, Table 2 points to similar tendencies in euphemization. The largest number of syntactic euphemisms, 3.6%, is found in Tadić's speech, and Nikolić's speech has the smallest number of euphemisms – 40/1.9%. Also, Tadić's speech is characterized by the greatest variety of syntactic euphemisms. He uses all types of language devices listed in the table, even *but* contrast, which is not found in the other three speeches. The most frequent type of syntactic euphemizing is using constructions expressing vague reference, with Tadić in the lead (1971 words: 40 euphemisms – 2%) followed by Romney (1856 words: 32 euphemisms –1.7%), Obama (1527 words: 25 euphemisms – 1.6%), and Nikolić with the fewest number of euphemisms (2132 words: 23 euphemisms – 1.1%). The table that follows shows the most frequent types of euphemizing in the speeches:

**Table 3** The most frequent types of euphemizing

Speech	Type of euphemizing	
Tadić	– 32	28 active constructions with the null subject (1p pl.) 3 active constructions with the overt subject (1 p pl.) 1 active construction with the null subject (3 p sg. or pl.)
Romney	– 29	29 active constructions with the overt subject (1 p. pl.)
Nikolić	– 23	13 active constructions with the null subject (3 p sg. or pl.) 9 active constructions with the null subject (1 p pl.) 1 active construction with the overt subject (1 p. pl.)
Obama	– 22	22 active constructions with the overt subject (1 p. pl.)

When two Serbian speeches are compared, it is obvious that Tadić relies on the use of syntactic euphemisms more than Nikolić. When the two American speeches are compared, the percentages show that their use of syntactic euphemisms is almost identical (Romney: 2.21% and Obama 2.36%).

In terms of the overall number of occurrences, Nikolić's use of euphemisms is closer to Obama and Romney's speeches (Table 2). Obama and Nikolić differ in their use of impersonal constructions, with Nikolić using eight impersonal constructions, and Obama none. Romney, unlike Obama who does not use impersonal constructions, has four impersonal constructions, which makes his rhetoric similar to Nikolić's.

### 3.2. Discursive strategies

Table 4 matches the language devices used as syntactic euphemisms with the corresponding discursive strategies (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 45, Wodak 2001a: 73) used for marginalizing commitment:

**Table 4** Discursive strategies

Language devices	Strategy	What for?
1. Impersonal constructions	exclusion	to avoid past and future responsibility
1.1. Modalized impersonal constructions	exclusion <b>T(11), N(4), R(3)</b>	to hide or not insist on the doer (similar to passive but stronger)
1.2. Existential sentences (exclusion of agent)	exclusion <b>T (1), N(2)</b>	to present states of affairs as having general, objective causes and validity
1.3. Infinitive (non-finite form), or <i>da</i> +present (similar to infinitive)	exclusion <b>N(2)</b>	to hide or not insist on the doer (similar to agentless passive but stronger)
1.4. Factive construction	exclusion <b>R (1)</b>	to present states of affairs as general truths
2. Nominalization	impersonalization <b>T (2), N (1), R (3), O (4)</b>	to avoid mentioning specific agents, to present actions as entities
3. Agentless passive	exclusion <b>T (2), N (1), O (2)</b>	to hide or not insist on the doer/agent, while focusing on the action
4. Vague reference	various strategies <b>T (40), N (23), R (32), O (25)</b>	
4.1.1. active construction with null subject (3p sg. or pl.)	suppression <b>N(13), T(1)</b>	to hide or not insist on the doer (but stronger in specifying the action and the doer than passive); to avoid responsibility
4.1.2. active constructions with null subject (1p pl.)	aggregation <b>N(9), T(28)</b>	to stress collective spirit (can refer to the party, government or the whole nation)
4.1.3. active constructions with overt subject (1 p. pl)	aggregation <b>N(1), T(3), R(29), O (22)</b>	to stress collective spirit (can refer to the party, government or the whole nation)
4.1.4. Pronoun <i>You</i>	impersonalization <b>O (2)</b>	to avoid specificity, to avoid naming names
4.2. Phrases	impersonalization, perspectivation, aggregation	to avoid responsibility for the past; attribute delay to a higher power;
4.2.1. NPs	impersonalization/ perspectivation <b>T(1), R(3)</b>	to avoid naming names to avoid responsibility for the past; attribute delay to a higher power
4.2.2. Phrases (other than NPs) instead of single words	impersonalization/ perspectivation <b>T(5)</b>	to avoid responsibility for the past; attribute delay to a higher power
4.2.3. NPs with indefinite quantifiers	aggregation <b>T(2), O(1)</b>	to avoid naming names
5. <i>But</i> contrast	perspectivation/mitigation <b>T(3)</b>	to justify the delay/limit the scope of the proposition
6. Restrictive clauses	nomination (referential) <b>T(10), N (6), O (2)</b>	to avoid naming names, vague reference
7. Conditionals	mitigation <b>T(2), N (1), R (2), O (3)</b>	to limit the scope of the proposition

Table 5 compares the use of discursive strategies in the four speeches:

**Table 5** Comparative analysis: discursive strategies

Strategy	Tadić	Nikolić	Romney	Obama
Exclusion	14	9	4	2
Impersonalization	2	1	3	6
Aggregation	33	10	29	23
Suppression	1	13	0	0
Impersonalization+perspectivation	6	0	3	0
Perspectivation+mitigation	3	0	0	0
Referential strategy/nomination	10	6	0	2
Mitigation	2	1	2	3
Total	71	40	41	36

As presented, the most recurrent discursive strategy is aggregation, most frequently achieved (92 occurrences) by using active constructions with the null subject (first p pl.) and active constructions with the overt subject (first p pl.), but not a very clear reference (Table 4). Aggregation is also achieved by means of NPs with indefinite quantifiers and an indefinite quantifier pronoun, but these two ways of realizing aggregation appear only three times in the speeches.

The use of the first person plural (both with the null subject in Serbian and the overt subject in Serbian and American English) is common in political speeches. This ‘*we*’ is called the ‘ *rhetorical we*’, and it is used in the collective sense of ‘the nation’, ‘the party’ (Quirk 1985: 350). Quirk (1985: 353–354) adds that this can be viewed as a special case of the generic use of *we*, which has the widest possible collective meaning, including reference to the speaker, addressee, and ‘third parties’. The reference of the ‘ *rhetorical we*’ can be enlarged from those participating in the speech situation to the whole human race.

As such, this ‘ *rhetorical we*’ can become a solidarity strategy used to marginalize commitment, taking into account that it is always safer to call on a party or a nation to take collective responsibility than to make vows in the first person singular, or attack the opponent directly. Besides, the analysis of the four speeches proves that a speech can do without many rhetorical *we*’s; Nikolić’s speech, for example, uses this strategy only ten times, unlike Tadić, Romney and Obama who use it more than any other strategy in their speeches.

Nikolić’s rhetoric is also characterized by the employment of suppression (realized by active constructions with a null subject – the third person sg. or pl.) thirteen times, whereas Tadić uses it only once. It must be noted that English does not allow the use of active constructions with a null subject, and that is the reason why this type of suppression is not realized in Obama and Romney’s speeches. Suppression can be seen in passive agent deletion, but in this paper passive agent deletion is classified as exclusion, as it is weaker in specifying the action and the agent than suppression. Exclusion is also rare in Romney’s speech (four occurrences) and Obama’s speech (two instances).

In terms of frequency of usage, three strategies are employed ten or more than ten times in Tadić’s speech (exclusion, aggregation, and nomination), two strategies in Nikolić’s speech (aggregation and suppression), and only one strategy in Romney and

Obama's speeches (aggregation). This leads to the conclusion that American speeches are almost short of any other strategies but aggregation, and Serbian speeches are richer in this aspect. In terms of the diversity of the strategies, Tadić tops all presidential candidates discussed here; he uses eight different strategies, Nikolić six, Romney five and Obama five. The results show that, in this regard, Nikolić's speech is more similar to American speeches.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1. Summary of the results

The analysis shows that:

- All four speeches have similar results in terms of the frequency of usage of syntactic euphemisms (Tadić 3.6%, Nikolić 1.9%, Romney 2.21% and Obama 2.36%).
- Tadić uses more syntactic euphemisms than Nikolić, Obama and Romney.
- Tadić's speech is shorter but richer in syntactic euphemisms than Nikolić's.
- Romney's speech (2.21%) and Obama's speech (2.36%) are almost identical in the number of occurrences of syntactic euphemisms.
- In terms of the number of syntactic euphemisms, Nikolić's rhetoric is more similar to Romney's and Obama's than to Tadić's.
- Tadić's speech is characterized by the largest number of different types of syntactic euphemisms used: seven types of syntactic euphemisms are employed. Nikolić's speech has six different types of syntactic euphemisms, Obama five types and Romney four types.
- As regards discursive strategies, the most frequent strategy found in Tadić, Romney and Obama's speeches is aggregation; in Nikolić's speech, the most frequent strategy is suppression, and aggregation is the second most frequent strategy.
- Aside from aggregation, few discursive strategies are employed in American speeches. On the other hand, in Tadić's speech, three strategies are used ten or more than ten times (exclusion, aggregation, and nomination), and in Nikolić's speech two strategies are used ten or more than ten times (aggregation and suppression).
- Finally, Nikolić's speech is closer to American speeches regarding its variety of strategies. Tadić uses eight different strategies, Nikolić six, Romney and Obama five.

##### 4.2. Discussion

CDA is criticized for its hermeneutic approach to text analysis, the broad context used to interpret texts, the large theoretical framework not always matching the data, and the overt political stance taken by politicians (Wodak 2001b: 4–5). However, within CDA, the concept of 'neutral' research is taken as a fallacy (Baker & Ellece 2011: 27), and, therefore, it is possible, and necessary, to overcome bias by means of adopting a multimodal approach to achieve the goal of exposing the exercise of hidden power relations in discourse. In this small-scale research, the analysis of the abstract concepts of commitment and agency is based on empirical data that show the similarities and differences in the use of syntactic euphemisms, and the similarities and differences in the use of specific discursive strategies related to those syntactic euphemisms. There is no

denying that the explicit mention of commitment and agency can be avoided, so when the political stakes are high, it comes as no surprise that evasive language is more preferable. The results of two quantitative analyses show that different politicians can rely on the same syntactic euphemisms and discursive strategies, which points to the existence of tendencies towards euphemizing. Also, the use of syntactic euphemisms can be revealing in the sense that tendencies towards using syntactic euphemisms are tendencies towards hiding the agent, presenting states of affairs as having objective causes (rather than human, individual causes), avoiding highlighting names, stressing collective guilt (rather than individual), attributing events to a higher power, and limiting the scope of the proposition. On the other hand, a careful use of syntactic euphemisms (which can be determined when comparisons between different politicians are made) can be a sign of the awareness of responsibility, but, at the same time, a sign of powerful rhetoric, a rhetoric that knows how to allure voters, a rhetoric that wins rather than fails. Wodak (2001a: 64), for example, describes politicians “both as shapers of specific public opinions and interests and as seismographs, that reflect and react to the atmospheric anticipation of changes in public opinion and to the articulation of changing interests of specific social groups and affected parties”. In an effort to react to changes in public opinion adequately and win over their voters, politicians turn to different discursive strategies, which can be defined as “a more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim (Wodak 2001a: 73)”. This means that politicians are acutely aware of their enormous power, which should be taken seriously. In that sense, CDA is a powerful tool with a practical purpose, which is raising awareness of the relationship between language manipulation and power control.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The most general aim of the research presented in this paper is to bring to light the possibility of using syntactic euphemisms for the purpose of marginalizing personal commitment in political speeches. In order to make this practice more visible, two Serbian and two American speeches are compared and contrasted. The quantitative analysis shows similar results in terms of the frequency of use (Tadić 3.6%, Nikolić 1.9%, Romney 2.21% and Obama 2.36%). Although the research is based on four speeches only, the results point to the existence of tendencies in euphemization. Of all four speeches, Tadić’s speech is richest in syntactic euphemisms, and in that sense, his rhetoric stands out from the rhetoric of the remaining three politicians, which, again, can lead to the conclusion that there may be a reason for such evasiveness. The most frequently used strategy in Tadić, Romney and Obama’s speeches is aggregation, and in Nikolić’s speech, it is suppression, with aggregation in second place. This makes aggregation, or stressing the collective spirit – and therefore, collective responsibility as opposed to that of an individual politician – the most favoured strategy of all. By using this strategy, and all strategies for marginalizing commitment in general, politicians make themselves seem less responsible and less powerful in the eyes of the public.

Every speech situation is ‘distorted’ by power structures (Wodak 2001: 13), and, what is more, language can be used to normalize and naturalize these distortions. This paper

attempts to show that syntactic euphemisms can be convenient tools for normalizing the relations of power. If it is possible to convey meaning by means of language devices other than syntactic euphemisms, then it means that there must be a reason why syntactic euphemisms are preferred, or not preferred. In the world of modalities, syntactic euphemisms are only one way of representing states of affairs. If the explicitly expressed agency and commitment to the proposition is only one way of representing states of affairs, then commitment and responsibility also become a representation. However, by applying the postulates advocated by CDA to empirical data, as this small-scale research does, it is possible to deconstruct representations and, in that way, become more aware of the manipulative potential of language.

**Acknowledgment:** *The research was done as part of the project 178014, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia*

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## MARGINALIZACIJA OBAVEZIVANJA: SINTAKSIČKI EUFEMIZMI U POLITIČKIM GOVORIMA

*U diskursu se mogu koristiti različita jezička sredstva kako bi govornik na izvestan način marginalizovao svoju obavezu prema izraženoj propoziciji, kao i da bi se oslobodio od odgovornosti koju bi direktna, otvoreno izražena agentivnost i/ili obavezivanje prema propoziciji implicirali. Rad se bavi sintaksičkim eufemizmima, koji se u širem smislu mogu definisati kao rečenice koje imaju sasvim malo negativnih konotacija, ili ih uopšte nemaju. U užem smislu, sintaksički eufemizmi su sintaksičke strukture koje govornik strateški koristi kako bi izbegao teret odgovornosti za odluke i radnje koje se mogu ispostaviti štetnim. Rad ilustruje diskurzivnu strategiju marginalizacije obavezivanja pomoću sintaksičkih eufemizama na primerima iz po jednog govora dva američka i dva srpska predsednička kandidata. Analiza jezičkih sredstava eufemizacije dovodi se u vezu sa kritičkom analizom diskursa, sa ciljem razotkrivanja sintaksičke eufemizacije kao mogućeg načina sakrivanja ili barem umanjivanja značaja potencijalno neprijatnih ili štetnih činjenica i istina.*

*Ključne reči: sintaksički eufemizmi, marginalizovanje obaveze, diskurzivne strategije, kritička analiza diskursa.*